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BILL GENTILE FOR NEWSWEEK

New supplies for some loyal allies: *A Sandinista-owned Soviet Mi-24 helicopter*

Moscow's Double Game

A mix of arms offers and Third World adventurism

Soviet foreign policy these days may owe as much to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who said that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," as to Marx and Lenin. Moscow's new arms control proposal is clearly part of a diplomatic offensive designed to improve its worldwide image. But at the same time, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev has launched an ambitious though less visible campaign to rearm a host of Third World allies who are fighting U.S.-backed rebel movements or supporting terrorist attacks on the West. While the Kremlin has stepped up support for its clients, the Reagan administration has shown a growing interest in attacking them. The danger is that both sides could be setting the stage for a confrontation that neither expects or wants.

While Libya's Muammar Kaddafi has vowed to back "terrorist and suicide missions," the Soviets have intensified their support for him. Some U.S. and Arab diplomats speculate that Moscow may have had a hand in last week's abortive coup in South Yemen (page 34). In Nicaragua, U.S. analysts believe the Soviets may have reversed an earlier decision and decided to improve the quality of their military shipments to the Sandinistas; in turn, the administration plans to ask Congress for as much as $100 million in military aid for the contras. The Soviets have also stepped up support to the Marxist government in Angola, and now Washington is debating whether to respond by providing covert aid to anti-communist leader Jonas Savimbi. A classified CIA study reports that Gorbachev has sharply increased overt and covert military aid to virtually all the Kremlin's Third World clients, including Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Syria and Vietnam.

Gorbachev's objectives may be similar to Ronald Reagan's in 1981. Like the president, Gorbachev took over after a period of weak leadership, economic floundering at home and repeated embarrassments abroad. The succession of ailing Soviet leaders, of setbacks in Syria, Grenada and Afghanistan, and of a new challenge from the Chinese leadership all contributed to a suspicion that what Marxists call "the correlation of forces" had turned against Moscow in the early 1980s. Now Gorbachev may want to reverse that correlation of forces before settling down to serious negotiations about Third World hot spots.

'Low intensity warfare': But while seeking to tweak the American eagle's beak, Gorbachev has been careful to avoid moves that might cause it to unsheath its talons. Instead of challenging the U.S. in areas where it has an advantage—nuclear warfare or full-scale conventional conflict—he has supported paramilitary and terrorist operations that take advantage of America's need to build a democratic consensus and its reluctance to risk a full-scale superpower confrontation. Recently U.S. military analysts have coined a name for the strategy: "low intensity warfare" (LIW).

Last week the administration convened a conference in Washington to discuss how to fight LIW. While differing on specifics, many of the current and former officials and other experts who attended seemed to be trying to build consensus for military action. Secretary of State George Shultz criticized Congress and the European allies for balking at retaliation, and argued that America's respect for international law should not prevent it from acting in self-defense. Shultz identified four areas where the administration should focus its efforts: encouraging a national debate about LIW; making full use of nonmilitary weapons such as antiterrorist defenses, criminal laws and economic aid to the Third World; better utilization of intelligence capabilities, including covert action, and resolving as a last resort to use military force, starting with Army and Marine units trained for limited interventions.

For two years Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger has publicly taken a more cautious line than Shultz's. Before acting, he has argued, the United States must first perceive a threat to its vital interests, identify clear military objectives, muster domestic support—and be sure it has the will to win. At the LIW conference military authorities still sounded less bellicose than the civilians, but Weinberger seemed to modify his position. He recommended removing legal restriction on U.S. training of foreign police forces, renewing Vietnam-style "nation-building" efforts in the Third World, devoting more time to mobilizing consensus at home and using Special Operations units when appropriate. He also said that "we must be prepared to act alone."

In a number of cases Gorbachev has moved to dampen tensions in the Third World: he has hinted at a possible withdrawal agreement in Afghanistan, tried to encourage a Middle East peace conference and pressured Syrian President Hafez Assad to arrange the release of the TWA hijack victims last June. But Gorbachev's actions elsewhere now stand to heighten tensions. The danger is that if Gorbachev's efforts to reassert Soviet power are rubbed energetically enough against the Reagan Doctrine, the friction could start a fire. While both sides have avoided any confrontation, a dangerous question remains: can the superpowers escalate out-of-the-way conflicts without slipping into larger and far more dangerous showdowns?

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